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ABSTRACT

The Rural Information Center (RIC), a project of two agencies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has served rural information needs since 1988. The targeted audience for the RIC is local officials and citizens, rather than scientists and federal officials, and the thrust of its information is rural development rather than production agriculture. The RIC is located at the National Library of Agriculture and networks extensively with experts, agencies, and information services to customize requested information to best meet user needs. Various information products are supplied in formats that fit users' requirements. The RIC's Health Information Service (RICHS) is one specialized service offered to provide easy access to the rural user. Between 25 and 35 percent of all RIC requests involve locating funding sources for local officials, rural communities, and citizens. The examples of two communities in New Mexico illustrate the RIC in use. The RIC also uses the services of several online vendor databases to provide user information. Presidential and congressional support ensures the RIC's continued growth and promises a favorable impact on federal rural programs. (SLD)

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AMERICA'S RURAL INFORMATION RESOURCE

BY

PATRICIA LA CAILLE JOHN

The Rural Information Center (*RIC*) was established in September 1987 as a joint project by two U.S. Department of Agriculture (*USDA*) agencies, the National Agricultural Library (*NAL*) and the Extension Service. RIC, located at NAL in Beltsville, Maryland, has served national rural information needs since 1988.

USDA established RIC to help local officials meet the farm crisis of the 1980's and revitalize the rural economy. RIC is a unique USDA information center in that its targeted audience are local officials and citizens--not scientists and Federal officials--and that the thrust of its information is rural development rather than production agriculture. The concept of RIC originated from a congressional mandate.

In April 1987 Congress proposed in House Resolution 2026 that USDA establish a National Rural Assistance Information Clearinghouse at NAL. Congress mandated in the Resolution that the clearinghouse would maintain a funding inventory of Federal, state, local government, and private assistance programs and services available to rural citizens in such areas as job training, education, health care, economic development assistance, and emotional and financial counseling programs. The clearinghouse would provide officials and leaders of small rural communities with rapid and direct access to current information on funding programs to help them stimulate depressed economies. The clearinghouse would link local officials with the appropriate Federal program or funding source and eliminate the often difficult and time consuming effort required to track down this information.

In May 1987 USDA agreed to establish an information clearinghouse at NAL as the third-point in USDA's six point rural initiative plan. Congress agreed to fund the clearinghouse as a line item in the NAL budget. The clearinghouse concept soon broadened as more USDA officials and agencies became involved in the planning process. Within two months the idea, which had originally started out as an inventory clearinghouse of funding program information, was evolving into a full-fledged information center.

This paper was presented at the conference on "The 21st Century: the Future of Rural and Small Public Libraries," Phoenix, AZ, November 19-21, 1992. An earlier version of the paper was first presented at the conference on "Information and Rural Economic Development: Infrastructure," Clarion, PA, June 4-6, 1992, jointly sponsored by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, the USDA Rural Information Center, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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THE RURAL INFORMATION CENTER MODEL

The idea of combining the Extension Service's nationwide technical subject expertise and educational network with NAL's national informational network in the RIC project resulted in an invaluable and natural merger. Of equal importance was the decision to locate RIC at NAL. NAL, with over two million volumes, has the largest agricultural and rural information collection in the free world. NAL's database, *AGRICOLA*, provides access to more than three million bibliographic records in the NAL collection. The RIC staff draws upon NAL's collection resources of books, journals, computer software, and audiovisual materials.

RIC performs a unique role in that it networks extensively with experts, agencies, and information services identifying invaluable information sources throughout the Federal government. This networking allows the RIC staff to know how to identify and locate unpublished information from reports or statistical data and technical information from Federal experts. Therefore, a request to RIC links the unsuspecting user to the vast Federal information network. RIC's goal is to meet rural information requirements by placing the best, most timely, and accurate information available in the hands of public officials and community leaders responsible for making informed decisions and implementing community programs.

In addition, RIC works directly with other Federal agencies to improve its information products. In 1990 the Small Business Administration (*SBA*) and its national SCORE (Senior Corps of Retired Executives) organization participated with RIC in a small business information pilot study in which SCORE and RIC identified user information needs. As a result of the pilot RIC and SBA assembled an information packet of SBA and RIC materials which RIC distributes to users seeking general small business and/or funding information.

The Cooperative Extension Service which is partially supported by Federal funding provides RIC with a network of state extension coordinators. All fifty states and Guam are participating in the RIC program. The majority of the state coordinators are state-level extension subject specialists, mostly community development specialists. These coordinators call in requests to RIC which they have received from local officials, community leaders, organizations, or other county extension agents. RIC staff respond by sending the requested information to the state coordinator for further analysis, interpretation, and consultation with the requesting individual or organization. In fiscal year 1992, eight percent of RIC's requests came directly from local officials and community development organizations seeking information assistance.

RIC is staffed by librarians and technical information specialists with specialized subject background in such areas as rural sociology, social work, nutrition, biological, social, and health sciences. Nearly all RIC staff members have one or two advanced degrees in their respective subject fields.

The RIC staff customize the requested information so that it will best meet the user needs. The staff provides answers to questions, supplies statistical data, provides information about software, usually health or business related, identifies economic development videos and software, provides referral information on organizations and subject experts when appropriate, and provides specialized computer searches of bibliographic citations, with abstracts and full-text from databases whenever available. The information package may also include pertinent articles, statistical tables, maps illustrating various aspects of rural demographics, or legislation from the NAL collection.

RIC staff produce bibliographies, special reference briefs, and other information products focusing on important rural issues such as funding assistance, small business development, education, health assistance services, agricultural and farm safety, affordable housing, alternative solid waste disposal, arts programs, financial management, and tourism, to name a few. RIC established the *Rural Information Center Publication Series* which presently consists of twenty-six titles.

RIC'S HEALTH SERVICE (*RICHS*)

A Federal cooperative effort which greatly strengthened RIC's information delivery capabilities is a joint effort between USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services (*DHHS*). Congress mandated in the 1987 Social Security Act that the DHHS Office of Rural Health Policy (*ORHP*) establish a national rural health information clearinghouse service to collect and disseminate rural health care information, research findings, and innovative health care delivery techniques to rural areas.

The ORHP staff had used RIC since it expanded nationally in 1988. The ORHP Director liked the RIC information service model and in September 1989 approached RIC with the proposal of incorporating the DHHS rural health center clearinghouse congressional mandate with RIC. The joint effort would prevent duplicating rural Federal efforts. ORHP would also be able to utilize the Cooperative Extension Service's nationwide network to disseminate rural health information to local communities and locate the health information clearinghouse at a national library.

NAL and DHHS signed a three-year interagency agreement in February 1990 in which NAL agreed to establish a rural health information service by that October. The service would function as a specialized subject component of RIC. This agreement

combined two congressionally mandated clearinghouses.

In October 1990 RIC announced the implementation of the health component, known as the Rural Information Center Health Service, or RICHS. As part of the agreement with ORHP, RIC acquired an 800 telephone number in order to provide easy access for rural officials, communities, organizations, and individuals seeking rural health and economic development information. Under this interagency agreement DHHS transferred nearly a million dollars to RIC to implement and operate RICHS during fiscal years 1991 and 1992. The RICHS service has been so successful that both agencies recently renewed the agreement for an additional five years in which DHHS will transfer more than two million dollars in support of the program.

RURAL HEALTH INFORMATION REQUESTS

Although RIC has greatly expand its capabilities to respond to rural health requests, it has been processing questions about various aspects of rural health care issues since its implementation in 1987.

With the implementation of RICHS, however, the number and variety of health questions escalated enormously. For example, RICHS receives questions about establishing computer networks for hospital consortiums, establishing rural hospital networks, and providing statistics for any conceivable rural health topic. RIC receives many requests from health care professionals seeking information on the health care status of rural citizens, including the homeless, Native Americans, minorities, women, the mentally ill, the elderly, migrant farm workers, youths, infants, and those living in designated frontier counties. RICHS does not handle clinical medicine questions and refers such questions to the National Library of Medicine or the appropriate Federal health information clearinghouse.

RURAL INFORMATION REQUESTS

While questions about rural areas reflect many of the social and economic issues of the more populated urban areas, rural areas, due to their remote and isolated nature, generate unique concerns. The topic of "rural" is as unlimited as the vast open spaces of the rural countryside. Just as the term "rural" does not easily lend itself to a concise definition, neither do the vast variety of questions received and answered daily by RIC staff.

RIC receives most of its requests from its targeted rural audience of community officials, leaders, development organizations, health care professionals, and the Cooperative Extension Service. RIC-supplied information assists this audience in preparing grant proposals, reports, studies, and

planning documents dealing with a variety of local government, education, social, health, and economic development services and programs.

Many local governments are addressing the varied and increasing service and social needs of their communities while experiencing a diminishing population and tax base. RIC receives many questions from local officials and organizations seeking information to assist them in their community planning programs directed at providing essential community services and promoting community development. RIC provides information and referral contacts, allowing decision makers to know what is available to them. The RIC-supplied information subsequently impacts the local decision making process in rural communities.

In addition to information requests about essential community services, local communities also seek RIC services to help in the preparation of programs and grant proposals for services dealing with issues impacting the community's social structure. Rural communities, like their urban counterparts, frequently encounter changing and ever increasing social needs. More recent health and social issues, such as how to deal with the homeless, youth at risk, youth alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse, battered women, elderly care and services, and AIDS victims, require new, and often costly, programs which place additional financial stress on small rural communities.

RIC continues to see an increase in requests focusing on services for rural youth. Many local communities seek information for establishing youth centers and developing youth programs, public school alcohol and drug education programs, programs to reduce the dropout rates, and innovative education programs.

Directly related to communities' concern to improve the quality of life and educational opportunities for their children is the growing interest in and rising number of requests RIC is receiving about the use of rural telecommunications programs. Local officials and communities are requesting information about telecommunications projects for rural school districts and opportunities for long distance education. Rural health administrators, likewise, are seeking information on developing and/or expanding physician training and degreed nursing telecommunication programs, and on the use of telediagnostics and telemedicine programs in rural areas. Communities are seeking information on the use of telecommunications in developing community economic strategies.

Other local government inquiries include identifying funding sources for crime prevention programs, fire, rescue and emergency medical service programs, alcohol and drug treatment programs, affordable community housing, and providing landfill alternatives for hazardous and solid waste materials, to mention just a few.

RIC has received many requests from communities seeking information for establishing recycling programs, developing recycling centers, and reviewing water standards and testing procedures to ensure the safe drinking water of rural citizens.

In addition to worrying about providing essential community services and related social help programs, rural governments are equally involved in community economic development efforts. RIC receives questions from county planning officials for information determining the economic impact of prisons on communities, providing incentives to attract correctional facilities, evaluating the use of impact fees that a local government charges a business to develop an area, planning the building of a community nursing home, designing and implementing a developmental park project, locating funds to restore, preserve, and even move historic buildings, and creating and retaining jobs.

Numerous local communities seek information on attracting, retaining, and expanding businesses, and encouraging economic development and business diversification by developing tourism programs, industrial parks, agricultural theme parks, business incubators, local cooperatives, and golf courses, to name a few. RIC also receives unique, but interesting, requests, such as how to restore a totem pole, how to establish a living history museum, and how to homestead in rural America.

RURAL FUNDING REQUESTS

On an annual basis, between twenty-five and thirty-five percent of all RIC requests involve locating funding sources for local officials, rural communities, and citizens. Local governments need to know the source of funds, if they qualify for the funds, and how they can get the funds. RIC has online access to a variety of private, state, and Federal funding sources through several databases, including the Foundation Directory, Foundation Grants Index, Grants and National Foundations, and FAPRS (the Federal Assistance Programs Retrieval System), in addition to a large printed reference collection of funding sources. RIC's most popular publication, *Federal Funding Sources for Rural Areas*, lists the more than 200 major Federal funding programs for rural areas.

FUNDING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE EXAMPLES

Many requests come from community development organizations seeking information and funding sources about how to proceed on a project and from budding entrepreneurs needing basic information on how to set up home-based businesses and referrals to local area organizations for financial and technical assistance. Because it usually takes a year or more to survive the lengthy

grant application process, it is difficult to find out about the role RIC may have played in assisting communities seeking information for funding or developing community programs. Although RIC has provided important information assistance for numerous officials, communities, and citizens, two communities in rural New Mexico provide just two examples.

NEW MEXICO FRONTIER HOSPITAL

RIC's most successful known funding information assisted a New Mexico frontier hospital. A New Mexico county extension agent discovered through first hand experience that the thirty-six-year old x-ray machine at De Baca General Hospital did not produce legible x-rays. Seeking funding assistance for the Fort Sumner frontier hospital, he called New Mexico's RIC State Coordinator who put him in touch with RIC. RIC supplied him with information about grant-seeking strategies and application procedures and identified a Federal grant program for which the hospital potentially could qualify. The county extension agent used these resources for the text and justification of a grant request to the New Mexico state legislature which approved a $260,000 hospital grant to De Baca General. Simultaneously the agent pursued the Federal grant. Five months after approval of the state legislature grant the Federal agency approved an additional $215,000 grant to De Baca General. With these two grants the hospital purchased a variety of hospital equipment, including some for intensive care and surgery. Some of the replaced equipment was more than forty years old. The funds allowed De Baca General staff to update their medical facilities and provide improved health care to an isolated rural community located over 150 miles from the nearest urban hospital.

NEW MEXICO MINING EXPANSION

A New Mexico mining company asked a regional development organization to assist in the identification of potential markets for zeolite. The mine had several million tons of zeolite, however, the commercial use of zeolite is still in its infancy. The company knew about only two markets and needed to identify additional ones before it could insure a profit to expand the zeolite mining operation. Therefore, the development organization contacted RIC for new market information. RIC provided a literature search and articles which helped in identifying six new markets including kitty litter, aquarium filtration systems, and supplements for chicken and cattle feed. With this information the development organization initiated contacts which resulted in determining that sufficient uses for the product potentially existed so that a formal market plan was developed by the mining company. RIC's initial information assisted the mining company in retaining twelve existing jobs in the county and generated initial annual sales of $500,000. The potential longevity of these jobs is very good, based on the

supply and market diver sification options for the product. An unexpected benefit tha t resulted in the success of this project was that both New Mexic o State University and the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology have begun research in the areas of zeolite for he avy metal pickup from contaminated oils and soils.

RIC'S ACCESS TO ONLINE DATABASES

As you can see, "rural" questions cover the universe of information and can not be located in a neat package or one comprehensive database. Therefore, RIC uses the services of several online vendor s ervices to respond to the varied questions received. The database s cover subjects ranging from congressional bills to environmental issues to business information to health care and rural educational issues, to mention a few. RIC staff are able to locate pertinent information on nearly a ny inquiry from one or more of these databases.

RIC has access to more than 400 different specialized subject databases and approxima tely 1,500 full-text sources. These online databases consis t of bibliographic records, some with abstracts, case studies, numeric data, while the full-text sources include newslet ters, journals, directories, and other information services. RIC staff provide the most comprehensive full-text record or inf ormation available.

The DIALOG service, one of the largest vendor services used by RIC, provides access to nearly 400 different subject databases containing over 260 mi lion records and over 150 full-text sources and directories. Records can range from a directory-type listing of companies, p rivate funding sources, and associations to an in-depth financi l statement for a particular company to a bibliographic citation and abstract referencing a journal, patent, conference pape r to the complete text of a journal article. DIALOG files contain bibliographic citations to all types of international literature and audiovisuals. NAL's database, AGRICOLA, co ntaining more than three million bibliographic records from NAL's collection of books, journals, and audiovisuals, is a vailable on DIALOG.

RIC also utilizes the Federal Assistance Programs Retrieval System (FAPRS). The F ederal government's General Services Administration in Wash ington, D.C., maintains this system; it provides on-line acces s to more than 1,000 Federal Assistance loans, grants, and tec hnical assistance programs. FAPRS is a full-test database whi ch allows the searcher to define and narrow the search to the who, what, and where of each funding program, such as who is eligibl e (state or local government); what type of assistance (grants or loans); what program objective (such as to provide low-income ind ividuals with self-help housing efforts in

rural areas); what Federal agency is the source of funding; what is the application procedure; and who is the program contact.

Another useful online database service is LOGIN, or Local Government Information Network, maintained by Control Data Corporation. LOGIN contains text records of 50 to 500 words each on problems encountered by local governments in such areas as economic development, housing, financial management, and services. LOGIN records include case studies and provide the name and phone numbers of key contact individuals or organizations, information on training courses, resource materials, and the status of research projects. In addition, LOGIN provides a unique service in that its users can input questions to the system and see if another user responds with information on similar experiences to aid them in resolving their inquiry.

RIC also uses the Phoenix Institute's Global Entrepreneurship Center's Network (GECN). This database offers a simple way to identify overseas trade and project opportunities, locate foreign companies for direct sales or joint ventures, determine the best source of financing, and locate foreign markets. It provides contacts for specific products and can put the rural entrepreneur and small business owner in contact with foreign markets. GECN also contains domestic databases on regional suppliers and tourism opportunities.

RIC also accesses NEWSNET, a full-text online database, for the business decision maker. NEWSNET contains timely, in-depth, inside information from industry newsletters and wire services on companies, products, technologies and trends covering over thirty-five industries and professions, including several with which RIC deals, such as education, electronics and computers, energy, environment, health and hospitals, telecommunications and tourism to name a few. It contains the full-text of approximately 500 newsletters and other news and information services. Much of the information available on NEWSNET is not available on other online services.

RIC uses the LEXIS/NEXIS database system for legislative tracking requests. There are nearly 4,200 databases between LEXIS and NEXIS services. More than 450,000 documents are added each week to the more than 167 million existing online documents. LEXIS is the full-text legal database which contains major archives of federal and state case law, codes, and regulations. LEXIS also covers many fields of practice, including tax, securities, banking, environmental, insurance, and public records. NEXIS contains full-text news and business information services with more than 750 full-text sources online. These include the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *The Economist*, corporation annual reports, and various news services.

RIC USER ANALYSIS

So far this year RIC has already processed requests from the President of the United States, Congressional committees seeking information for preparing pending legislation, numerous U.S. Senators and Representatives, Cabinet-level Department Secretaries, State Governors, major newspapers, and network news shows seeking to verify information before their evening broadcasts. Although these exciting high-level and often urgent requests in which the requestors needed the information yesterday definitely keeps life interesting at RIC, they do not represent our major users--just our most prominent ones.

The majority of RIC's users are the county, state, and Federal extension services; local, state, and Federal officials; health care professionals and organizations; universities; and individuals. Other high volume users include small businesses, community development organizations, and libraries. RIC has experienced nearly a 175 percent work-load increase since establishing the 800 toll-free service and the health service two years ago.

In fiscal year 1992, forty-five percent of RIC requests dealt with health care issues, thirty-four percent with economic development and revitalization issues, while the remaining twenty-one percent dealt with the quality of rural life, environmental and natural resource issues, and local government and community services.

ELECTRONIC BULLETIN BOARD ACCESS TO RURAL INFORMATION

RIC is currently working with the Small Business Administration (SBA) and the USDA Extension Service in a cooperative effort to disseminate rural information electronically. In the 1990 Farm Bill, Congress passed legislation mandating that all three organizations--SBA, Extension, and RIC --provide rural program and development assistance information to rural citizens, however, Congress did not approve any additional funding to implement the mandate. Therefore, as an initial step, RIC is expanding rural information access on the RIC/RICHS sub-board of NAL's electronic bulletin board, named ALF.

RIC loaded SBA's *Working Together: A Guide to Federal and State Resources for Rural Economic Development*, from an electronic file provided by SBA. RIC set up the SBA information as resource files for each state. RIC provides full text access to the rural titles in NAL's *Quick Bibliography Series* and most titles from the *Rural Information Center Publication Series* which includes, among others, funding resource directories, Federal funding sources for local governments, publications on tourism, health, affordable housing, and historic preservation.

RIC is loading information of interest to rural and small libraries provided by Clarion University and RIC-prepared files listing rural conference and resource information. In addition, RIC is identifying other Federal agency rural program information for future additions to the bulletin board.

The RIC Health Service (RICHS) staff also added several rural health bulletins to the RIC/RICHS sub-board. The bulletins include information on Federal and private rural health grants; rural health publications; national, regional, and state rural health conferences; the Rural Health Research Center's activity reports and publications; Federal rural health legislation; and agricultural health and safety programs and activities.

PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT: RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

RIC continues to coordinate with USDA and other Federal agencies with rural development programs to expand the program at the Federal level. Since 1990 RIC has become a focal point for Federal cooperation and program expansion as a result of mandates from President Bush, the White House Economic Policy Council Working Group on Rural Development, and Congress. The involvement of USDA and other Federal agencies reinforce RIC's national level mandates.

President Bush's Initiative on Rural America recommended providing a center to give technical assistance and detailed information on Federal programs that service rural communities. This initiative was to take the form of an expansion of RIC and the participation of all relevant Federal agencies. In addition, a key RIC function was to provide toll-free access through an 800 telephone number.

NEW FEDERAL PARTNERSHIPS

At the direction of President Bush's Initiative on Rural America USDA, under the guidance of the Chair of the White House Economic Policy Council Working Group on Rural Development Secretary of Agriculture Edward Madigan, and other Federal agencies with rural programs, are continuing to assist RIC's expansion through a variety of cooperative efforts.

In addition, RIC enjoys great support from the USDA Office of the Under Secretary for Small Community and Rural Development. The Under Secretary's office has long promoted the idea of Federal agency cooperative staffing and financing as a means to expand RIC's resources and information delivery capabilities.

In the summer of 1992, the USDA Farmers Home Administration signed a Memorandum of Understanding with RIC for the purpose of transferring a funded position for RIC to hire a social science librarian. In addition, the USDA Forest Service also plans to

fund a staff position for a natural resource information specialist at RIC. The Forest Service also plans to purchase the initial computer workstation and provide RIC with annual funding to cover the training, travel, online database charges, and publication charges in support of the position.

NETWORKING WITH STATE RURAL DEVELOPMENT COUNCILS

As part of the Presidential Initiative on Rural America RIC is now networking with the newly established State Rural Development Councils (SRDC). USDA tested this concept in eight pilot states for nearly two years with very successful results and is now expanding the program nationwide.

President Bush made it clear in his Initiative on Rural America:

> "...that government and the private sector need to work together to get rural America back on track based on locally identified needs...The councils are partnerships among business and federal, state and local government designed to address those needs.
>
> "The councils, which are established in cooperation with governors in each state, serve as a vehicle for private and public entities to collaborate and develop local solutions for economic development. All federal agencies operating programs in rural areas are represented as council members. In addition, state and local officials serve on the council, and are commonly joined by the private sector, education, health-care and labor representatives.
>
> "As with the eight pilot councils, federal agencies, including USDA, will cover 75 percent of the councils' operating costs; non-federal members will cover the remaining 25 percent. The eight pilot states are Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas and Washington. USDA, as the lead department in rural development, is taking the lead in expanding the program nationwide. USDA expects to add the remaining states and two U.S. territories during the next two years. As chairman of the President's Economic Policy Council Working Group on Rural Development, Madigan has overseen the establishment of the state rural development councils."1

RIC is fortunate in that it came into existence as a high-level USDA initiative and Congressional mandate to meet rural information needs. RIC received support from President Bush's Initiative on Rural America, the White House Economic Policy Council Working Group on Rural Development, Congress, Secretary Madigan, Under Secretary Vautour, and Assistant Secretary Hill.

Top level USDA officials view the success of RIC as an essential link in the USDA rural development program.

In spite of RIC's brief existence of five years on the national scene, it has been involved in several highly visible USDA and Federal rural development planning activities. RIC hopes that this visibility and participation in both department and interdepartmental-level Federal rural development planning initiatives will continue and that, likewise, RIC activities will continue to impact favorably Federal rural programs.

ENDNOTE

1. USDA News Release, February 19, 1992.